

Acts 2:14a,22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Psalm 16

Last Sunday.....on a gloriously beautiful spring day..... we celebrated the most extraordinary reality of our faith.....the resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his execution on the cross. As far as we know, it had never been done before and has not been done since.....although we can marvel at those who have had 'near death' experiences and can tell us what it was like. Jesus' death and resurrection form the cornerstone of our faith.....and it is a unique cornerstone among all the major religions of the world. No other religion professes worship of someone who has been deemed to be both human and divine simultaneously. It's quite a remarkable claim. And one that has endured for over 2000 years.

We refer to ourselves as 'Easter People.' We continuously celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus week after week, all year long. Every Sunday is a mini-celebration of the Resurrection. Last Sunday we celebrated the beginning of the Easter Season.....the 50 days that come after Easter until the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. When we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the 12 days of Christmas. When we observe Lent, we observe the 40 days in Lent, the penitential season. For Easter, it is a 50 day celebration and it is Easter every day.

But it was certainly not a celebration on that first Easter! There was no joy among the disciples. It took several encounters with the risen Lord for the information to sink in and become a reality.....a reality that all the disciples eventually risked their lives for. The first hint of Resurrection came when Mary Magdalene found the tomb was empty. She assumed Jesus' body had been stolen and she ran to tell the others. Peter and another disciple ran to the tomb to check out Mary's story and they, too, found it empty. They both saw the empty tomb and the discarded linen wrappings for a corpse, but only the unnamed disciple is said to have believed in what the empty tomb meant. Mary recognized the risen Lord only when he called her by name and she raced to tell the others.....who did not believe her testimony!

By evening of that first resurrection day, the disciples were huddled together behind locked doors trying to make sense of the last few days. They were confused, terrified, hurt, distraught, and despairing.....all except Thomas. For them, the reality was that Jesus was dead. Even though there was some evidence on this third day that something had happened to his body, they weren't at all sure what it meant.

We don't know why Thomas wasn't there, but it seems both inaccurate and unfair that throughout Christian history, he has been saddled with the nickname Doubting Thomas.....as though he were the only one struggling with doubt at the time and even now. He was not.....then or now. All the followers of Jesus were struggling with doubt. All of them were trying to make sense of a reality that they could not understand. By the time Jesus was raised from the dead, they were still trying to figure out how the crucifixion could have happened in the first place!

Perhaps Thomas could be more aptly dubbed Thomas, The Realist. Perhaps he was not with the other disciples because having heard about Jesus' missing corpse and the possibility of resurrection, he was fearlessly out looking for him! Perhaps he actually had more faith than the others, not less. He wasn't cowered behind locked doors. He was out wandering the streets.

When he finally joined them, they told him about their incredible experience with the risen Jesus who had simply appeared among them.....with the doors still locked.....and offered them peace. And he offered up his wounds for them to see, to touch, to examine. He knew they were mere mortals.....like us..... and needed to have proof positive. Jesus offered them his body, his wounds, his voice.....whatever they needed in order to dispel their own doubts. For each one, it was different, but at the end of the encounter, when Jesus breathed on them, each one of them was sure. All of their doubts had been put to rest. All of the skepticism had been satisfied. Each one knew they had seen the risen Lord.

And when they saw Thomas, they shared the experience with him, but because he wasn't there with them when the encounter happened, he found the whole thing hard to believe. He didn't ask for anything that the rest of the disciples had not been offered.....to see Jesus' wounds.....to be able to put a hand in the wound in his side. A week later, the disciples were back in the room behind locked doors. This time Thomas was with them and Jesus appeared to them again.....and he offered to Thomas the same thing he had offered the other disciples the week before. But Thomas didn't need to touch anything.....as soon as he saw Jesus and as soon as he heard his voice, he believed. He knew who he was seeing and talking to. And he claimed Jesus, "My Lord and my God." He had all the proof positive that he needed.

Jesus' appearance to his disciples didn't come in public or even out in the open where others could see or overhear. It happened behind locked doors. This revelation was private.....for the believers only.....and believers have doubts. They always have and they always will. Strands of certainty are intertwined with strands of doubt and woven together to form the beautiful fabric of our faith.

Some of the most important things that ever happen to us, happen behind closed doors and in private. No one else can quite understand what we experience there or how an encounter has impacted us. Often there are no words that are adequate. When we try to explain and we fail,

sometimes we resort to saying simply, "I guess you just had to be there!" And so it was for the original disciples on that first resurrection evening. And yet, when Thomas encounters Jesus with the rest of the disciples, Jesus provides Thomas with the same experience, but then adds, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

But none of us is going to buy a tall tale lock, stock and barrel without any proof. That would be foolish. We want some kind of evidence. Sometimes, we want proof positive.....no room for doubt. Requiring evidence is part of our human nature and Jesus seems to know that about us.

But this story isn't really about Thomas. It is about the nature of Jesus. It is about Jesus' willingness to offer himself again and again to those scared and confused disciples.....to offer the proof before they even ask for it because he knows that's what they need. He knows how incredible this all is for them. And he understands how frightened they are. The very first thing he does is offer them "Peace."

It is the nature of Jesus to go to those people who long to see him.....even when they are behind locked doors hoping to be safe. And how often do we lock ourselves away in an effort to feel safe? We lock away our hearts and we turn our heads away even as we are saying.....and thinking.....and praying.....for the evidence that Jesus is really alive and with us. Jesus comes to us again and again.....locked doors and locked hearts and all. He comes to us when we are fearful and distraught, but are longing for him nevertheless. He offers himself to us. He offers to give us the evidence we need. And for each one of us that's different.

Has it ever happened to you.....that in the midst of your fear and your confusion.....in the midst of the stress of a crisis.....in the midst of your furtive and continuous prayers, he comes to you with the proof you need? Something happens and suddenly you just know.....down to the bottom of your soul.....that Jesus is present. That's our proof positive.....when all of a sudden, we are sure!

Perhaps it's just the right word spoken at just the right moment; or maybe it is our sudden awareness of the grandeur of life and the temporary nature of our problems; perhaps it is hearing from exactly the right person at exactly the right moment.....a phone call, a card in the mail, an e-mail.....from someone we love and need. And perhaps it is as simple as a completely original thought that just pops into our heads mysteriously and provides us with insight and a calm that we hadn't known before.

Just as Jesus understood about the disciples need for evidence, so he understands about our desire to be sure. We can't see the wounds, but we can experience his presence nevertheless. He comes to us when we need him and sometimes even when he seems far away from us. He comes to us when we have lost our way. He comes to us when we doubt and even when we are

angry. There is nothing that he will not do to reach us.....even behind locked doors and locked hearts. Even when we think he's not there.....or he's not real.....even when we doubt. And he will come to us over and over again.....as many times as we need. Our faith comes not so much in our seeking after him as it comes from his seeking and finding us.

When you've experienced his presence, it's a hard thing to describe to someone else. I've heard people say that "All of a sudden, in the middle of this horrible crisis, this overwhelming sense of peace washed over me!" And I've heard that more than once. It seems to be a recurring theme.....a common experience among Christians. And peace is the first thing that Jesus offered to the disciples when he presented himself to them in that locked room on the evening of his day of resurrection. All mystical and spiritual experiences are hard to explain. At some point in the conversation, we are tempted to say, "Well, I guess you just had to be there!"

These stories about the disciples and Thomas are not stories about them as much as they are about grace.....about the grace of God who sent Jesus to us in the first place and raised him from the dead for us. These stories are about the grace of Jesus searching after us until he finds us.....and then providing us with all the proof we need. He knows we need that experience.....that evidence.....that proof positive..... in order to know that He is alive and well and with us. And once having encountered Jesus, we are never quite the same.

Thanks be to God.

**AMEN.**